Memorial Day 1975 - A Crisis of Faith
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Ezekiel 37:1-6

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Memorial Day is different this year. As I thought about it last week, it became clear that there are substantial differences between the climate in which we observe Memorial Day in the year of our Lord 1975 and the climate which has prevailed for every other Memorial Day in the past. It is a time for looking back and remembering those who died in the service of country, for causes which were right and good ~~and holy~~: conflicts in which we came out the winner. We were nurtured on that. I can recall one time during the Second World War asking my father what would happen if we lost. I shall never forget his answer: "We won't lose - we can't lose." That was that: no more had to be said. Given that certainty, that spirit, one could remember those who had died and were dying with sadness, yet pride. For the cause was just and because of the ultimate sacrifice of a lot of people right would prevail.

And now, 1975, and with special poignancy we must include in that corporate memory the fifty thousand who died in a conflict which, if we did not lose neither did we win; and the unspeakable sadness of those who died on an island off Cambodia - and the two who died last week simply because someone wanted to express hatred toward the policies of our nation. We must remember them, too, and in remembering deal with the implication that we live in a world in which people may keep on dying for ambiguous reasons. That is a different kind of Memorial day: an entirely different and more painful exercise in ~~But Memorial Day has always been a suitable time for looking~~ ~~about~~ corporate remembering. It's not nearly as clear + proud and easy to address as it once was

In fact the ambiguity of Memorial Day, 1975 - is reflective of what the commentators on our culture keep calling a crisis of faith . .

~~celebration, a unique event in the life of the nation, certainly a most appropriate time for reflecting on the shape of the future in light of the past. And as we begin I would submit that for a complex catalog of reasons we have on our hands a major crisis of faith.~~ Perhaps "crisis of confidence" is a more apt phrase, and yet I believe we're dealing with somet ing more profound than confidence. We're dealing with the corporate belief of the people of this nation in the basic concepts of our system: we're dealing, I think, with fundamental attitudes regarding the viability of ~~our system, our way of life~~ this Republic - its role in the world - its ability to survive . .

It is revealing to learn how drastically those attitudes have changed in a relatively brief period of time. In 1937, Robert and Helen Lynd, did a classic sociological study of life in middle - America under the title, Middletown in Transition. In a chapter, "The Middletown Spirit", the authors identified certain "of course statements" - beliefs and ~~convictions~~ values that were almost universally accepted as true. Among them were,

- "the American Democratic form of Government is the final and ideal form of Government."
- "Americans are the freest people in the world"
- "America will always be the land of opportunity and the greatest and richest country in the world."

Those attitudes have been shaken - perhaps they needed to be - ~~The faith has been shaken. The idols of the cities~~ perhaps they were less than honest and not very realistic. And yet ~~have crumbled, too~~ in their place is a listlessness, a skepticism: a new "of course" statement - "the American system is sick." Govt. officials can't be trusted - ~~the system is corrupt~~ Sensitive news commentators put their finger on it with regularity. Something has gone out of the heart of America and we are the poorer for it.

who was often prophetic

Several years ago the late Walter Lippmann, wrote: "The malady is caused, I believe, by the impact of science upon religious certainty and of technological progress upon the settled order of family class and community. 'Virtual despair' [redacted] comes from being lost in a universe where the meaning of life and the social order are no longer given from on high- but have to be investigated and discovered and experimented with, each lonely individual for himself." (see Roger Shinn, Tangled World, p 151)

Grant for a moment, that although the attitudes of a [redacted] simpler time were comfortable, they were not realistic. What then is the nature of the crisis of faith everyone seems to be talking about?

I was intrigued to discover in the April issue of Fortune Magazine, a Bicentennial edition, a series of articles on the "Battered Pillars of the American Systen." The preface read as follows: "Belief in God, belief in the ability of education to develop human potentialities, and belief that science assured benign and continnual progress - these three kinds of faith have been major pillars of the American system, sustaining confidence in it and optimism about its future. But in the last couple of decades all three pillars have undergone a great deal of chipping and cracking. Indeed, there have been somber warnings that one pillar or another - if not all three - had become too weak to provide support any longer." ([redacted]) Peter Berger, a sociologist at Rutgers University with a keen interest in instutitional religion in America, wrote the first article. Acording to Berger, "there are grounds for believing that the spirit has gone out of American religious institutions." Think about that for a minute In the past two decades the Churches tried desperately to

(A) The crises in education and science are not our concern - but if, in fact, there is a crisis in religion it is most certainly our business

Over & over we were told that religion must be relevant

stay in touch with what looked like an increasingly secular culture.

We were told that a faithful Church should let the world write the Agenda, preach a religionless gospel, that God was more immanent that transcendant and that a Christian's role was to involve himself in the structures of society: join a picket line, or protest injustice. Christian theologians started talking about the death of God. There was something grand and good, it seemed, in proving to one another just how secular, and non-traditional we could be. At the same time, other churches were moving in the opposite direction refusing even to acknowledge that there were desperate problems about which Disciples of JC had to be concerned. The result - a deep fracture in the church - often with local congregations; and a weakening in everyone's confidence in the church..

The problem, you see, was that the culture to which we wanted to be relevant was also having immense problems, ~~and needed for us to help~~ ~~[illegible]~~s ~~[illegible]~~. "In sum", Berger wrote, "the most significant development in the area of denominational religion has been a monumental failure of nerve... In contemporary America, the development has been ironic and devastating, for the secular culture to which the Churches were called to accomodate themselves has itself been going through profound failure of nerve. The schoolboys, having hopped on the bandwagon, are still exclaiming that they have at last been liberated while the bandwagon has been rapidly falling apart beneath them. The secular city, it turns out, was made of cardboard." (Ibid. p 135)

The churches, according to Berger's analysis, don't need to be anything but what they are, namely - the churches. But we have come so far that it's going to take some doing, some renewing from the inside

out: some thinking and praying about who we are as a Church and who God wants us to be. Many have given up. Many apparently feel that, in fact, institutional religion is a dead issue. Many members of the Church, this one included, simply and eloquently boycot it week after week.

Now, there is such a thing as "Medical Student's Disease", a situation in which a student begins to recognize in himself the symptons of whatever pathology he happens to be studying at the time. So - with religion and theology: the more we read and discuss the problems of the church the more evident it appears that we have them all, and that there is no hope. A better way, I think, is to keep our situation in the perspective of history. and our own Biblical heritage. And I invite you to do so by traveling back in time to the sixth century Before Christ.

The Prophet Ezekiel lived in a very critical time for God's people, one which in many respects is similar to our own. Judah, the southern part of the nation, was essentially a vassal state under the heel of Babylon. Two ill-advised and disastrous rebellions had taken place with the result that Nebuchadnezzar invaded and brought the downfall of Jerusalem in 586 B C. It was a complete blotting out of the nation, innocent people were slaughtered, every town of importance was destroyed and all but the very poorest were carried off into exile. There was no evidence to indicate that the nation could survive

The reasons for the disaster were that the rulers of Judah, for perfectly understandable motives of patriotism, wanted the flag to wave proudly once again. They wanted Judah to be a great and strong nation among nations. And so they sent out diplomatic feelers to other potential enemies of Babylon, made some treaties and eventually revolted. An heroic effort. - and yet an error Israel made many times - confusing faith in the nation w/ faith in God

The prophets, Ezekiel among them, told them that it was a mistake. It certainly didn't enhance their standing with the rulers, but they thundered that God wanted a holy and just and righteous people: not necessarily a great military power. Ezekiel was in Babylon with the exiles when Jerusalem fell. The last section of his book contains his words of comfort and hope to a defeated and devastated nation.

His vision is perhaps one of the most popular in all Biblical literature: a deserted battlefield littered with the dry bones of fallen and defeated warriors: an eloquent image of God's people at that point in time. "Can these bones live?" God asks and Ezekiel answers, 'O Lord God, thou knowest?' Is there any hope at all for the people of God: any future at all for the covenant community: or for that matter for God's will and purpose?

Now if you want to relevant and with it in that situation what do you do? Why, you go back to Babylon and urge the exiled Jews to start accomodating to Babylonian culture: start intermarrying and give up a few of the more particular customs: face the facts and start living again.

But the word of God takes a curious twist at this point - and this is the importance of the whole passage. "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Hear the word of the Lord'." The prophet's role in the vision is very important. He is not to be simply a spectator. He has not been given the vision in order more dramatically to comprehend Judah's plight. He is to be a participant. Of all things, he is to preach to this hopeless and helpless congregation. He is to be faithful: he is to be true to his identity as a man of God even in the valley of dry bones.

Out of the debacle of arrest crucifixion + death came the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Out of persecution, suffering + martyrdom - God's people have risen again, time after time.

In the vision the bones live again. In history Israel did rise again from the grave of its exile in Babylon - one of the most remarkable facts in the story of the human race. (*) Are we not here dealing with the mission of God's people - the church of Jesus Christ if you will?

We must be relevant - but Relevance is never as important as faithfulness. The Church must continue to respond to human need, human suffering, human injustice - but when the world writes the agenda, when we stop being the particular and peculiar people of God - we are headed for deep trouble indeed.

Now let's put that Biblical understanding in the context of our nation

For better or for worse the health of this Republic has been related to the relative vitality of its religious institutions. George Washington was more of a deist that an Orthodox Christian but he was not far from the truth when he said, "True religion affords government its surest support." Now I do not mean to say that the Church should be an obedient and docile servant of the state: this one or any other one. That is idolatry. The shameful compliance of the German Church with Nazi-ism should ever be our school master when we are tempted to equate Christianity with good citizenship. But in point of fact there is something at the heart of the American experiment which rests heavily on a robust and healthy practice of religion. That is the intent of the First Amendment to the Constitution, by the way: not to protect the state from interference by the Church, but to guarantee the total freedom and independence of religion within the state.

(*) There can be no independent source of values in a dictatorship. Hitler had to have the church on his side. Communism too - must either seduce or stamp out any robust + independent religion

The American system historically has depended on the Churches to generate those moral values upon which political health depends in turn. (*) Totalitarianism, of course, generates its own value system. But in this Republic it is to religion that the state has looked for the generation and celebration of integrity and justice and compassion. And the

(*) I am not saying that ~~Patriotism demands~~ patriotic people should support the church because it is good for the nation. That would be blasphemy. What I am saying is that ~~the reaction~~ part of the uniqueness and strength of our country is its reliance on free and healthy and renewal of that is an integral part of whatever future our two hundred year old system has. (*) at times troublesome religion.

Perhaps the unique ministry of the Church in the midst of this crisis of faith is simply to be faithful: as was the case with Ezekiel, to preach God's word of love and justice to what looks, for all the world like a valley of dry bones. Perhaps we need to be a little less frantic + self critical + a little more confident in the future — more reliant upon the promise of J.C. - that he is w/ us + will be w/ us even to the end of the age. Perhaps we need to be less neurotic about our traditions • ~~and less important~~ ~~that everything~~ the Harvey Cox - who has preached + taught the gospel of radical involvement also counsels that church - simply be the church - for the good of the culture religion must be " an antique settee in the freeway - an indecipherable old song disturbing the sleep of the computers"

In another time St. Paul addressed himself to a tiny Christian community - an overwhelming minority facing persecution, suffering and perhaps death. It, too, was a time of crisis: his words of admonition and advice at the conclusion of a letter he wrote to the community are modest but, it seems to me, very relevant to our situation today.

"...we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. For we are glad when we are weak...heed my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and ~~place~~ peace will be with you" II Corinthians 13: 8,9,11

Memorial Day

It is a time for looking back and remembering ~~those who have died in the service of our country.~~ It is a time for looking forward and asking ~~with eagerness~~ about the future. It is time also, ~~I would submit~~, for acknowledging that a great deal depends on our recovering something of that spirit and that promise. Amen

God of our Fathers, we believe that you have led us in the past. So lead us today into the future. And call from us a faithful and obedient response, through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen